John Napier



Born: 1550 Died: April 4, 1617

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John Napier lived a rather long, successful life. His discoveries greatly changed mathematics in the world in all cultures. He was the first to discover and study a mathematic method called logarithms. He looked into and created simpler ways to calculate many different types of math including trigonometry, arithmetic, and algebra. Napier was and still is considered a prodigy, as he got an excellent education starting at a young age. John Napier’s discoveries changed mathematics forever.

John Napier’s great career and life was created and inspired by his father, Archibald Napier. Archibald and his family owned many estates all across Scotland and was a great public figure. His father believed firmly in his Protestant religion and fought heavily to support it. Archibald married Janet Bothwell, this was his first wife and it was John Napier’s mother. She herself came from a wealthy background as she was the daughter of an Edinburgh burgess. Little to nothing is known about John’s early childhood other than he was raised in a wealthy family. He was born in the year 1550 at the Merchiston castle which was located near Edinburgh, Scotland. John Napier first started his college education at St. Andrew’s University, he was only a mere 13 years old. This however, was a typical age for wealthy men to start their education. John didn’t last long at St. Andrew’s, as he dropped out not long after he started. The next several years of his life weren’t well documented and not much is known today. Historians have an idea that Napier traveled around Europe and furthered his education there. In 1771, he returned to Scotland, to a town called Gartnes. Here, he built his own castle. John Napier met a beautiful women named Elizabeth Stirling, and the two got married and had two children; Joanne and Archibald. Elizabeth died unfortunately by the year 1579. Luckily, John Napier already married again and had ten more children with his new wife. John and his family resided in Gartnes until the year 1608, when his father died John inherited the Merchiston castle, in Edinburgh.

Although he would later become famous for math-related success, John Napier lived mostly as a stable Scottish landowner. He watched over his family and land. He actually experimented with science quite often. He liked to consider himself a scientist although it was never considered a profession and he made no living from being a scientist. He tested different kinds of fertilizer to try to make a better, cheaper way to fertilize crops. He even invented different ways to drain water out of flooded coal pits which included his new hydraulic screw and revolving axle. Napier was also big in the then heated controversy of religion. Like his father Archibald, John was a “die hard” protestant and even wrote a book. In this book it is clear that John believed the pope was actually the anti-christ. He wrote the book in 1593 and it was read by many people in several different languages. Being the inventor he strived to be, John even created weapons and other tools to stick up for his beliefs in the very serious religious wars. These sorts of weapons included giant mirrors said to catch ships on fire, and even an unheard of underwater craft. Him and his father took their religion very serious and he stuck up for his protestant beliefs strongly.

While John Napier lived this rather interesting life, he had a strong passion for astronomy. He studied the stars and calculated their movements for a very long time. After almost two decades of stargazing almost every night they were out, John simplified his complex use of trigonometric functions and used logarithms. Logarithms made the long and difficult calculations much easier to process. He published some of his work in rough sketches. After his death his work was followed up by Henry Briggs and made easier to understand. Napier made more breakthroughs in trigonometry, as he created formulas for solving spherical triangles. John Napier kept striving in the mathematics world and he later invented ways to simplify the advanced calculations in arithmetic. Napier would make physical rods, often made from bones or ivory, that made multiplication a lot easier. Multiplication then became a process of simply matching the numbers up on the rods, and the answer would be given. Almost like an ancient calculator. John the experimented with other types of math and eventually made a series of rods to calculate square roots and cube roots. John Napier is proved too also look into the algebra part of mathematics. Along with all these great talents, it is rumored that John Napier was not only a mathematician, but also a “magician.” He was believed by some to have supernatural powers and that he owned a black rooster that was his spiritual familiar.

It is unclear as to when John Napier started experimenting with mathematics, other than we know he was already looking at algebra just after his first marriage. One thing is for sure, he was pretty good at it. John Napier invented many formulas that simplified patterns and made some mathematics much easier to calculate. Although he lived an average life of a rich landowner, John Napier was always striving towards making things easier. Whether it be science, agriculture, or math, John truly did have a huge impact on society. His inventions only still helped after he died, as his same concepts are still being used today. Eventually, on April 4, 1617, John Napier died due to a combination of gout and overwork. He lived a very long, eventful, and successful life. It is not known as to where John Napier is buried, but it is believed that he lies at the old church of St. Cuthbert’s parish in Edinburg, where he died. His great discoveries still live on today, and are greatly appreciated by society. In fact, in 1964 Napier University was opened in his honor. His simple passion for astronomy and observing the stars inspired this great mind to create many different tools to simplify extremely complex mathematic calculations. Napier’s complex work and notes were later simplified themselves by Henry Briggs, shortly after Napier’s death. Henry Briggs made the trip to Scotland in 1615 to better understand Napier’s work and fix any misunderstandings he had.

Works Cited

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